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ABSTRACT

Women who occupy the status of "never-married" form a social category virtually ignored by social scientists. The socialization and sex role literature indicate the normative expectation for middle class females is for adult life to be based around marriage, so those women who never marry deviate from societal expectations. And, women who never marry usually deviate from the expectations of their associates and themselves, since the never-married role and identity generally are evaluated negatively. This analysis draws from existing studies, singles' advice books, and personal observations in considering the transformations of identity of women who do not follow the expected role sequence moving from eligible singles to married women, but instead become old maids. The processual nature both of recognition of the possibility of never marrying, as well as the strategies employed in adjusting to the unmarried role are analyzed. (Author)

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A PROCESS OF IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION FOR THE NEVER MARRIED WOMAN*

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INTRODUCTION

In occasional examinations of the role of never married women, social scientists have argued that current high rates of marriage have reduced the significance of this social category (e.g., Epstein, 1970:94) and that a new favorable image, e.g., bachelor girl, has replaced traditional negative stereotypes. No doubt the situation of the unmarried female has improved in recent decades;[1] however, it is presumed that such individuals are stereotyped negatively in that being married is still more prestigious than being never married in our marriage-oriented society.

Most American women do marry and usually do so by their mid-thirties; for instance, in 1970 ninety per cent of the United States women ages 30-34 were currently married.[2] The never married female is in a statistical minority. Nontheless, the never married category remains substantial. Given the on-going shifts in cohort sizes, we suspect a potential marriage squeeze and a probable increase in never married females in the future (Akers, 1967; Hirschman and Matras, 1971). Never married females, then, as a subgroup of the population and a social category deserve the attention of social scientists (Adams, 1972).

Entrance into marriage initiates as well as implies continued movement through the family life cycle, analogous to an individual's passage through sequential career stages within a work organization. Organizational career frameworks imply recognized positions and roles with time expectations

attached for the attainment of a particular position and contingent expectations about time of occupancy in each of the successive positions. Goffman (1961) and others (e.g., Stebbins, 1970) have specifically focused upon subjective careers, changes in individuals' conceptions of self and others associated with movement through organizational positions. Individuals' awareness of the various roles and their adjustment to them is due to anticipatory socialization, as well as responses of others to role performances.

Marriage and motherhood typically provide such career frameworks for middle class adult females with future expectations of marriage organizing plans for most young women's lives (Miller, Galanter and Pribram, 1960). The few available studies of the personal and social adjustment of single women tend to examine older women who previously had developed some role and personally acceptable identity (Reed, 1942; Faherty, 1964; Baker, 1968).[3] This paper examines the transformations of identities of women who do not follow the expected adult female career, moving from eligible single to married and married with children, focusing upon the individual's recognition that she will not marry and the strategies employed in adjusting to the unmarried status. Due to the sparcity of sociological literature on subjective careers of unmarrieds, depictions of single life by and for unmarried women in the mass media, in recent "advice" books (e.g., Baer, 1968; Coy, 1969; Greer, 1969), as well as personal observations are utilized for descriptive purposes.

TRADITIONAL FEMININE SOCIALIZATION

In our society at some point during adolesence (when depends upon group norms), the female is perceived as entering the marriage market, initially engaging in casual dating but eventually in serious dating leading to marriage. A young woman may temporarily by-pass serious dating and marriage by continued education and/or entrance into the work world. Women receive some training for work or career; however, they have not been encouraged to place primary emphasis upon a life-long organizational or occupational career (Epstein, 1970; Watley and Kaplan, 1971). At best socialization to work and career roles is ambivalent (Knudsen, 1972:361; Kreps, 1971:viii). Encouragement to pursue an occupational career and to exhibit non-sex specific abilities may be provided, but the young woman often is reminded that she should not become so successful or aggressive that no one would want to marry her - that she should not become "unfeminine." Eventually, a woman either marries and assumes the generally expected adult female career based upon marriage (with which she may combine employment) or moves at some point from the desirable status of eligible single to the unclear status of unmarried (Perlman, 1968:100). The never married status creates uncertainty for the individual and for others, for there is no set of expectations for those who never marry just as there are none for widows (Lopata, 1973).

CAREER OF THE UNMARRIED

Marriage Timetables and Identity Turning Points

Social identities associated with categories such as roles involve beliefs about the attributes of role performers (Goffman, 1961). As time passes and events occur, the social group assigning the social identity may perceive that the individual no longer has the appropriate attributes for a current social identity and assign a different identity. Both the social group and the individual reappraise the individual's identity and obviously these reappraisals are interlinked. A young woman who is perceived to enter the marriage market is assigned the "normal" social identity of eligible woman. The young woman who accepts this identity as well as those who assign it expect she will marry in a few years and her adult identity will be based upon her marital role.

A person has encountered a crucial identity turning point, if she is assigned a new undesirable identity (e.g., old maid) rather than maintaining a desirable current one or acquiring an anticipated desirable one (married woman). The times or points at which an individual reevaluates identity are somewhat structured by socialization and the reference other's behavior (Strauss, 1959:100). The socialized nature of such turning points is reflected in one young woman's reflections

> In the beginning I believed all the matrimonial propaganda. I believed the rules of the game I'd learned as a child - the one the "old maid" always loses. I believed that it didn't really matter what I did with my life as long as I didn't end up as an old maid. I even believed I'd automatically become an old maid - if heaven forbid! - I was still single on my twenty-fifth birthday.
>
> The turning point in my attitude - and thus my life - came on my twenty-fifth birthday (Greer, 1969:1).

Whether or not a woman actively desires to marry, there is a point in her life when she perceives the possibility of choice between marrying and not marrying as becoming limited. The recognition that her child-bearing years are passing may be associated with this perception. Completion of education structures "senior panic" for college students if they are not married and have no prospective marriage partner. Individuals may set personal standards. If a woman does not marry by a certain birthday, before a certain other (e.g., the most unattractive girl in town), or when her peers marry, she may experience a sense of no longer having a choice.

As the individual ages, associates often point this out to the unmarried. The comments of family, friends or coworkers about her choosiness or her passing youth may lead a woman to reevaluate the possibilities of marriage. Individuals may be unaware of the crucial time dimension of marital expectations until dwindling opportunities for goal fulfillment are perceived. On the other hand, realization that she has reached a turning point may occur when others no longer question her about when or whom she is going to marry, but instead avoid the subject.

Most young women do not want to accept the identity associated with never marrying (e.g., Greer, 1969:159), for the permanently unmarried status has various negative conceptions which suggest possession of negatively valued attributes. The unmarried woman is often characterized as being physically unattractive to males (and to others), being sexually frigid, and disliking children.

The mass media, particularly in the form of advertisements, constantly suggest to women that lack of a mate is because of physical or social undesirability and a career is only a substitute for husband and children

(Epstein, 1970:30). According to one single "modern advertising and propaganda would have you believe that the capture of a man was the first and foremost aim of every woman, no matter what the cost. Anyone who fails in this is a total failure" (Faherty, 1964:23). And, although modern contraception has made it feasible for the unmarried to engage more freely in sexual activity, the unmarried is frequently perceived as sexually deviant either engaging in no sexual activity or "extreme" activities. Social mores proscribe childbearing for unmarried women, so one component of the stereotype of the old maid focuses on her barreness and lack of fulfillment.

Such characterizations make it difficult for women to accept the unmarried role and accompanying identity, so many desire to avoid applying the stereotypical identity to themselves. Application of such characterizations by non significant others is unavoidable. A woman, however, may negotiate with her close associates to establish that she does not fit the stereotype and thus disavow the role and identity.

Avoidance Strategies

Although the likelihood of marriage decreases with age, it is not clear when marriage expectations are no longer realistic. Depending upon the region, religion, ethnic group, and educational level involved, being labeled as an old maid may occur at any age. Age 30 appears to be cited most often since most of the women within a cohort who are going to marry, have married (Carter and Glick, 1970:298; Coale, 1971; Hastings and Robinson, 1973).

In any case, the time limits on the identity of normal adult female may be altered by extending the dating role, participation in the marriage market, when women begin to recognize they are older and still unmarried

(for example, as they approach 30). Marriages of middle age women to widowers and divorcees (although they do not match the romantic ideal) are sometimes used as a basis for justifying time extensions. Time extensions are very often an advantageous ploy for others and the individual in coping with unmet expectations. Others might have to help the woman cope with the problems of the unmarried role and/or acknowledge flaws in the familial or adult social system. For the individual, postponement may provide successful attainment of the goal or time for gradual adjustment to the situation.

Dawning recognition that one has reached or passed the expected age of marriage may lead a woman to change her marriage market behavior, to develop new tactics for meeting men. Women are advised by relatives and friends, as well as the numerous "how to get your man" advice books and articles, to increase opportunities for meeting eligibles by seeking new situations (changing jobs or neighborhoods, joining new clubs and taking "swinging" vacations). Close friends and relatives may try to assist singles in meeting men by arranging dinners and parties to which they invite eligible men of their acquaintance. Minor personal remodeling tactics, such as losing weight and buying new clothes, are frequently associated with attempts to increase the number and quality of men met and dated.

Another set of tactics to avoid never marrying involves alteration of selection criteria. Men in social categories generally defined as undesirable for the young marriageable woman (e.g., men shorter, younger or less socially desirable than she; men already married) can be considered on an individual rather than a categorical basis. One single's advisor suggests

that women over thirty should consider the currently married man (Baer, 1968:121-129), while others advocate the divorced man arguing that he is a better catch than the "rejects" who are still single.[4] For some women there is apparently more stigma associated with never marrying than marrying someone who could be categorized as a "lesser" sort (Perlman, 1968:99). Despite various tactics suggested for eventually marrying, even if the spouse is not ideal, the hypergamy principle still operates. For instance, "the patterns of marriage rates for white women appear to reflect considerable reluctance on the part of many spinsters to marry available bachelors of similar age because the men tend to be of lower status or to marry widowers or divorced men even if they are of comparable or higher status on the ground that they could be worse off married" (Carter and Glick, 1970:323). Thus, a substantial number of women apparently do not change their selection criteria or perhaps they change them, but still do not marry. (Of course, some women may chose to remain single.)

The acceptance of a woman's continued status as eligible unmarried appears to be related to the adoption of alternative tactics for becoming seriously involved in the marriage market. Some women are labeled old maids at a relatively young age because their appearance or behavior is considered inadequate or inappropriate for attracting eligible men.

Acceptance of An "Abnormal" Identity

A woman may hesitate to acknowledge her inability to attain a desired status due to continued hope of attaining the status. When a woman reaches the point when her expectations of marriage become limited or untenable, her adult female identity must undergo some transformation, since most of her adult life plans have been based upon attainment of this status.[5]

Her identity must be reconceptualized and future plans revised. Acceptance of the unmarried identity challenges and perhaps discredits other aspects of her self. There is some implication that a woman has failed in the selective process of mate selection because of her unsuitable characteristics, that she lacks the necessary personal qualities or she exerted insufficient or ineffective effort. One single's advisor states "A major complaint of older singles - over twenty-five - is that many people assume there's something wrong with a girl that age who is still unmarried. So many people are brainwashed into believing there's something 'funny' about the older Miss that it's more acceptable in most cities to be divorced! 'That 'Mrs." proves you have been wanted by someone at least once,' a divorced girl suggested" (Coy, 1969:244). An article on being unmarried in a magazine directed at young women (Cosmopolitan) clearly presents the personal failure argument: "What are the girls doing who fail? Or, what are they failing to do when they do not succeed? Mostly these women have faulty attitudes - a way of looking at life and men that is unrewarding" (Fromme, 1968:44). A woman who remains unmarried for whatever reason can be discredited (maintaining the system), so that she and those she encounters must cope with her changed less socially desirable identity.

Accounts

Unmarried women are well aware of the process of speculating why someone is not married and the frequent conclusion that the individual is a pathetic creature. Until a woman has devised some account to personally neutralize these evaluations of what is "wrong" with her, she and her close associates may find interaction strained. The difficulty of this is noted in one study of single women which found women "had apparently adjusted more easily and

readily to the realities of the single woman's life than they had to other people's opinion of the single life for women and their estimate of its value" (Reed, 1942:72).

These ready stories may or may not represent the unmarried's beliefs (at least initially), for "tired of being asked why not, (the unmarried) has adopted some ready explanation that could be true, and repeated it so often that she now really believes it herself" (Klemer, 1959:4).[6] Those with whom the unmarried has personal relationships are expected to accept her account, whether they feel it is entirely valid or not.

Accounts may involve denial of the desirability of marriage as a goal for a particular woman. Avoidance of open discreditation may be avoided by denial of interest, for example, by denigration of the role expectations of wives or the identity of housewife. Denial of personal desire and/or suitability for marriage (e.g., does not like children, likes to be independent) may be espoused.

Another type of account accepts marriage as a reasonable goal, but denies opportunities to achieve it or suggests the costs involved in attaining the goal would have been unreasonable. Some women indicate they were too involved in family obligations (Reed, 1942) or in pursuit of a career to spend their time finding a mate. Others say they did not marry because they did not want to "play games to catch a man", their man died, or they did not meet the "right" person (Faherty, 1964).

Whatever the account, it provides some closure for the individual and her close associates, so they can go about the business of interacting. It appears that it is becoming more acceptable to account for never marrying by denying the goal, whereas in the past lack of opportunities was cited.

ALTERNATIVE LIFE STYLES

Women who see no physical or social differences between themselves and those who have married are not willing to view themselves as not normal, to accept the permanently unmarried status and the associated labels of spinster and old maid.[7] It is societally desirable that these unmarrieds be cooled out (Goffman, 1962), so they do not start serious questioning of our mate selection procedures or of marriage itself. And, those who interact with the individual do not want to feel that the person has been unjustly treated. So, a process of individual consolation can occur gradually and covertly, leading to the acceptance of some alternative to the desired situation.

Alternative Roles

A woman may make her occupational role central to her adult identity.[8] A profession may organize a woman's adult life and provide a satisfying identity and relationships with others. However, many single women do not have the type of job which organizes their life or the desire to become work-centered, although more single women than married women have been professionals.

A single may become involved in organizations and activities, although unmarried women have lower rates of voluntary participation than married women (Ferriss, 1971). Religious involvement does seem to provide a focus for some women, perhaps especially Catholic women (Faherty, 1964).

Even, if the individual emphasizes work or voluntary association roles, stable social relationships are still frequently limited (Adams, 1972:92-96). Also, unmarried females do not have structured adult relationships since they

are not performing expected familial roles. Expectations for adult home-life and companionship have a familial base, which the unmarried woman lacks. She does not develop a family of procreation and her family of orientation gradually dissolves leaving her without that form of social anchorage (although 40% of the spinsters aged 35-44 in 1960 lived in a parental home (Carter and Glick, 1970)). There is no substitute familial role, for even the maiden aunt who helped her siblings raise their children has virtually disappeared (Carter and Glick, 1970).

Social Relationships

Since there are no obvious characteristics which distinguish women who marry from those who do not, most unmarried women probably had friends who were also unmarried but gradually married. There may be little held in common with friends who married due to the nature of the married female role. In addition, unmarried women may no longer chose to associate with married friends, for these individuals serving as references may make the unmarried person less able to accept her position. Close friendships with married males may be inhibited because of general perceptions of (and sometimes actual experiences with) those relationships. Due to the pair orientation of our society, most adult activities are planned for pairs. Thus, unmarrieds are frequently isolated from former friends.

Making friendships in new jobs and communities may be difficult and these problems are frequently discussed in advice books. Social situations such as parties provide opportunities for relationship formation, but singles as they grow older lack these social situations since they tend to be structured in terms of pairs (even if the pairs reorganize at the gathering).

The role of unmarried woman might be more viable if relationships with other unmarried women were established. One single's adviser argues that other unmarried women can help the individual by sharing problems; however, she warns that it is dangerous to be too comfortable with them, if the individual desires to marry (Greer, 1969:56). Most individuals as they move out of the post adolescent dating period find they know few single people of either sex and even fewer they want to associate with. They do not want to associate with people they may see as neurotics and rejects or people they have nothing in common with except marital status. Unmarrieds are perhaps unwilling to embrace their shared deviance for unknown advantage.[9] (Relationships with single males are difficult to maintain as a woman ages, since the possibility of marriage inhibits the development of any other type of social relationship, such as friendship).

New Roles and Relationships

The lack of social relationships for unmarrieds is of considerable importance since it may be related to the mental and physical problems they experience (Gove, 1973). Swinging singles' areas, bars, housing, vacations, social clubs and publications which emerged in the late 1960's suggested the emergence of a new life style and adult role for unmarrieds.[10] Whatever the appeal of the "swinging single" role, it is viable for only a limited portion of adult life, due to its emphasis upon youth, attractiveness and freedom for responsibility.[11] The restricted time span in which this role can be performed fails to provide females with some sense of future social relationships. A near thirty swinging single in Southern California explains "I've been dating since I was fourteen,' she says, her voice trembling slightly,'I get tired of dating. I want to be married because I want steady companion-

ship. Now I want someone who cares'" (Streshinsky, 1972:214). Overall, it appears that the swinging single role is not a longterm alternative to a marital role, for it is difficult to distinguish it from the dating role which leads to marriage, except the participants are older (Moran, 1972).

Some of the new family styles offer a variety of social relationships, but they do not provide long run alternatives to the sense of stable relationships in the nuclear family. These alternatives have been perceived as a response to the inadequacies and flaws of the present marital system in providing the individual with adequate personal relationships. Communal living, cohabitation and trial marriage suggest any individual can easily be replaced and generally they are perceived as alternatives which reject the long term commitments of marriage. (Any marriage may not endure as long as one of these alternatives, but marriage is perceived as potentially supplying a long term resolution.) Since the nuclear family is so deeply embedded in our way of life, e.g., social engagements seem to require heterosexual pairs and job mobility appears incompatible with communal life, if the individual desires to be conventional in other aspects of her life, current alternative arrangements are not very feasible.

CONCLUSIONS

The heterosexual pair orientation of middle class American society creates difficulties for all those past their twenties who are not currently married. The never married female encounters those difficulties and also a questioning of her identity due to her not acquiring the socially approved status for adult women, wife.

Whether or not a woman remains single by choice, she will be perceived as "deviant" and assigned undesirable attributes by larger social groups. She must cope with the ambiguous role of unmarried and the negative attributions. One positive resolution for the individual woman is to conceive of herself as a unique individual who has worked out her own role and special relationships and thus disassociate herself from others who share the status. Since the role of the unmarried woman is so vague, unique definitions of it are possible. Close associates are expected to accept and may even assist in defining a unique role and an acceptable identity.

Although defining oneself as a unique individual not constrained by existing roles is an individual solution, the problems of this social category are not resolved. Given a "marriage squeeze" and the desire of some women not to marry, the potential lifestyles of the unmarried deserve further investigation. If there were less societal stress on a female's marital status and other statuses were accepted as of equal or greater importance, acceptance of the permanently unmarried status could be facilitated.

FOOTNOTES

[1] In this paper the terms unmarried, single, spinster and old maid always refer to the never married female.

[2] Although for each successive birth cohort in recent years the proportion of ever married women has increased, the never married category remains substantial.

[3] Two other types of research on singles appear in the literature: one focuses upon reasons for not marrying (e.g., Kuhn, 1955), and the other compares physical, social and psychological characteristics of marrieds with unmarrieds (e.g., Klemer, 1954; Gove, 1973).

[4] In fact never married men appear to have more undesirable characteristics than never married females (e.g., Knupfer, et. al., 1966).

[5] It might be questioned whether we ever give up such socially desirable identities if we really desired them, although we might state that we have.

[6] See Lyman and Scott (1970) for an extended treatment of accounts. Goffman (1961:150) suggests an individual's construction of his life career might be termed an apologia.

[7] Women who have physical handicaps, are less attractive or lack social skills may be somewhat prepared for the negative identity of unmarried due to early failures in dating. For example, a young girl who is handicapped may speculate about what her life would be like if she were married, rather than what her life would be like when she married.

8 Havens (1973) argues that unmarried females are likely to attain high incomes and are probably not the stereotypical "rejects," but rather women who have chosen careers over traditional feminine roles.

9 In areas such as California singles' organization have existed and have focused on such issues as how the tax structure affects singles.

10 The mass media have heralded the emergence of the swinging single role for both sexes by providing guidelines for how to become one and by describing role models, e.g., Joe Namath-like sports heroes and Gloria Steinem-type career women.

11 The female swinging single continually seems to be oriented to getting her man before she looses her youth and attractiveness. Coy (1969) indicates that singles' organizations and living complexes frequently stipulate that participants must be between 21 and 35 years of age and bar clientile is usually limited to those under 30 by informal pressure). This suggests a time limit for maintenance of the swinging single role. Of course, this role is never very feasible for those who are unattractive or have low incomes.

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